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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 003159

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KS PINR

SUBJECT: ROK TROOPS IN IRAQ: UNDP PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE CHUNG OPPOSES EXTENSION

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On the same day President Roh formally proposed to extend the stay of the Zaytun unit in Iraq for one more year (see septel), United New Democratic Party (UNDP) Candidate Chung Dong-young formally announced that he would oppose the proposal. Chung and the leaders of the UNDP cited a promise made by the ROKG to complete the mission by the end of 2007. According to close Chung advisors, the decision to oppose the deployment was made for purely domestic political reasons -- Chung hopes by opposing the Zaytun extension proposal, which the opposition GNP presidential candidate Lee Myung-bak supports, he can appeal to anti-U.S. sentiment and motivate the center-left and liberal voters. End Summary

¶2. (C) Ms. Cho Beckhee, one of Chung's top foreign policy advisors, told poloff that Chung personally supported extending the deployment but felt he had to oppose the proposed extension for political reasons. According to Cho and other Chung advisors, by opposing the extension, Chung will be able to differentiate himself from Lee Myung-bak on an issue that is likely to gain popular support. Mr. Kim Ki-bong, chief of staff to Chung spokesperson Choi Jae-cheon, echoed this sentiment when he told poloff that Chung had hoped his "Peace Economy" policy based on extensive engagement with North Korea would have spearhead his campaign. However, this strategy had thus far fallen flat since Chung's policy was seen by most as similar to GNP candidate Lee's. Since the KORUS FTA would not be debated before the December election, the Iraq deployment was the only issue Chung could use to set himself apart from candidate Lee.

¶3. (C) The UNDP lawmakers obtained the necessary majority signatures on October 22 to make opposition to the troop extension an official party position. Cho explained that after the party decided this, Chung felt justified to make his decision. Cho said that Chung had asked her to convey to the Embassy that he had thought a lot about his decision but he had to make policy dictated by the party and by public sentiment. She also noted that while he had made his current position clear, the discussion on the extension was not over since public sentiment could emerge in favor of the deployment and at that point Chung could reconsider his position.

¶4. (C) The bill to extend the deployment is expected to go to the Defense Committee in the National Assembly on October

¶24. However, it is not likely to pass in the committee. Since the UNDP has adopted opposition to the deployment as its official position, the nine UNDP members must oppose the bill. There are only seven GNP members on the committee and two other lawmakers who likely would oppose the extension. To pass the committee and go before the plenary for a full vote a majority is needed in the committee. If the bill does not pass the committee, the Speaker of the Assembly could bring the bill directly to a vote, but this will require some agreement between GNP and UNDP floor leaders, especially since the Speaker is a member of the UNDP.

Comment

¶5. (C) Chung Dong-young is far behind in the polls and is willing to use any method to try to overcome the 30 percent gap between himself and GNP candidate Lee Myung-bak. Right now he sees an opportunity to play to anti-American and anti-war sentiments among the Korean voters. Mainstream dailies today, including JoongAng and Chosun, are characterizing Chung's position on the Zaytun extension as a strong indication that Chung and the UNDP will stir up anti-U.S. sentiments, reminiscent of Roh's campaign in 2002 when he stirred up anti-American sentiment over the death of two school girls in an accident involving a USFK vehicle. Chung, a former correspondent to Los Angeles, whose son is now at Stanford, has always portrayed himself as strong on the alliance and a friend of the U.S. Undoubtedly, he does not feel comfortable sustaining his current position on ROK troops in Iraq, but he has clearly calculated that latent anti-American sentiment and those opposed to the war in Iraq will boost his popularity.

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